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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: "National and international cooperation for social development"

Statement submitted by International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council**

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The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

All around the world, men, women, and children whose very lives have been frayed by the great injustice of poverty voice the following challenge: "We want to be part of the future, but our efforts and our courage lead to nothing. History passes us by, leaving us behind."

Social development, for all and by all, is still an unfulfilled objective. However, with the World Summit for Social Development, held at Copenhagen in 1995, and subsequent events, the fight against poverty has emerged as a priority for the international community. The 1995 Declaration[1] is ambitious as it calls for:

> "all men and women, especially those living in poverty, [to] exercise the rights, utilize the resources and share the responsibilities that enable them to lead satisfying lives and to contribute to the well-being of their families, their communities and humankind."

* E/CN.5/2003/1.

** The document was submitted late to the conference services without the explanation required under paragraph 8 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, by which the Assembly decided that, if a report is submitted late, the reason should be included in a footnote to the document.

[1] *Report of the World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 6-12 March 1995* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.96.IV.8), chap. I, resolution 1, annex I, para. 9.

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This ambitious appeal must be the driving force behind the "new partnership" that was called for by the Governments present at Monterrey in 2002. To guarantee the success of this "new partnership", there must be mutual respect among all countries that subscribe to this idea. Yet international cooperation needs to be inspired by another form of partnership — a partnership within each country, between decision-makers and very poor populations. Without such partnerships in all regions, north and south, east and west, international cooperation will fail.

It is important to highlight that many local development initiatives are already under way that engage people living in poverty. Such initiatives are run by courageous people, because giving priority to the poorest is just as challenging on the local level as on any broader level. However, the late Fr. Joseph Wresinski, founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, warned that working solely at a grass-roots level is equally as dangerous for poor populations as working solely at an international level. He argued that whenever the future is being planned, if the poorest people are not part of the conversation at the outset, they will have no place later on when changes are implemented.

Let's be honest: neither our societies-at-large nor their poorest members are in the habit of dialoguing with each other. It's rare that a society puts effort into trying to understand the thinking of people who have no formal training to express what life has taught them. While they have learned about paths out of poverty, their very exclusion has also taught them a broader vision for the future of humanity, one we all need.

This is not to say that people living in poverty are completely absent from all discussion, research or initiatives. However, it is one thing to talk about people living in poverty, and quite another thing to engage in dialogue with them.

It is equally as infrequent and difficult for people living in poverty to have the confidence in themselves to get involved in the development of communities on the local, national and international levels. It is not enough to invite them to a meeting. They also need to feel at home, and to have others in the room believe that people in poverty are intelligent human beings with valid experience that is vital in shaping the thinking and design of our communities. If the poorest feel that others can become trusted partners, they will dare to look for ways to express what they know.

What are the conditions needed for enabling this meeting of the minds and hearts to take place, and for this new understanding to be a guide for successful international cooperation?

1. The need for direct contact between people living in extreme poverty and the people and organizations who have overall responsibilities for development work: This encounter should be the basis for learning from one another. The experiences, know-how and learning of each partner should raise questions for the other. This will forge a mutual understanding out of which will come a common language and common goals.

Many innovative projects that promote this kind of dialogue with the poorest populations already exist. Often, they have too little support to continue. More support for them is a key to creating links with the most vulnerable people.

2. Recognizing that human rights should be the very foundation for international cooperation: This will guarantee that all people live in dignity — the

ultimate goal of development. But we must be wary of creating a hierarchy of human rights, as one homeless man living in the central train station in a major European city illustrates: "Just because we survive by scavenging in garbage cans does not mean that we are rats." In emergencies, the thinking is that people will be grateful for a minimum and that the rest of their rights can be considered later. But being kept alive is not the same as leading "satisfying lives" and contributing "to the well-being of their families, their communities and humankind", as the Copenhagen Declaration says. Our ambition is that each person, not just some of the people, have the means to contribute to their community.

3. Creating new opportunities to break out of the identities of the developers and the to-be-developed: To break these boundaries requires creating forums where everyone can openly think about and question themselves and others about their values, whether cultural, philosophical or spiritual. Through these forums, each person — whatever their position in society, and no matter what their region — can contribute to a shared vision of humanity, where all people are accepted and listened to as equals.